

THE ONLY WAY IS ESSEX

Part 1

Mike Trippitt reckons that there's much more to Essex than orange perma-tans and dim-witted reality TV stars. Get 'well jel' over his voyage of discovery...

WORDS & PHOTOS MIKE TRIPPITT

Amongst paperbacks, hardbacks, Cartlands and Grishams, one title on the charity bookstall calls out to me. I pay £1 over to the Essex Wildlife Trust's volunteer manning the impressive Naze Centre at Walton on the Naze and hope he's not noticed the book's cover. I hurry back to my campervan, checking that I'm not being observed. I will decide later whether I am ready to open *"The Only Way Is Essex: Official Guide to Living Life the Essex Way"*.

My VW T6 'van, George, and I had arrived in Essex earlier that morning. We'd come south through Suffolk to Leavenheath. Quiet roads twisting through gently rolling farmland rich with spring colours carried us on to Stoke-by-Nayland, a charming village famed for its cottages, timber-framed houses, hotel, golf club and spa.

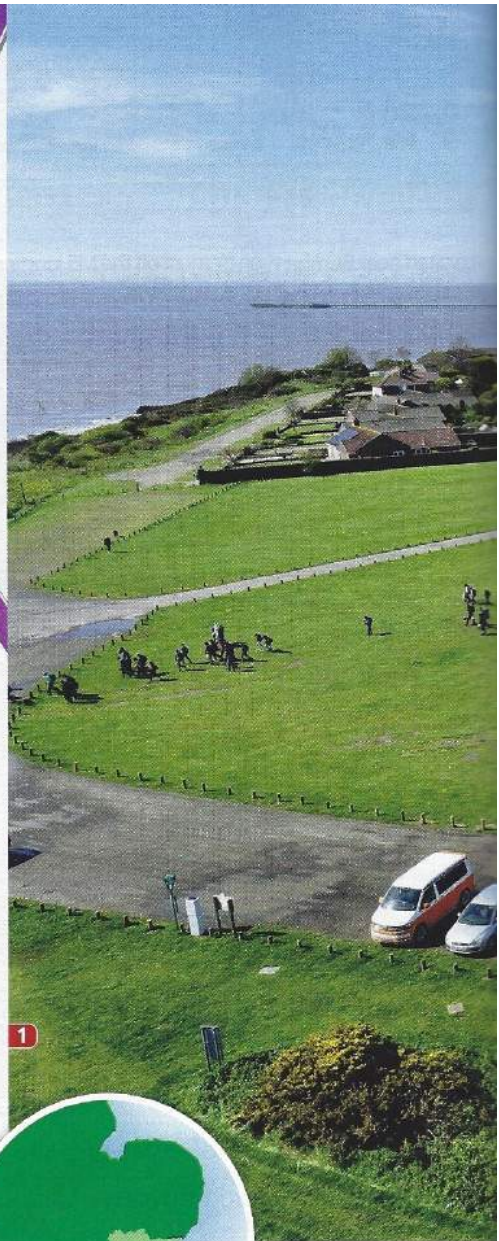
It's like art innit?

From there, Dedham Vale, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and the

Stour Valley, dispel any preconceptions of this county immediately. Known as 'Constable Country', the Essex-Suffolk border is popular with artists and tourists alike. Flatford Mill, immortalised in John Constable's *The Hay Wain*, is a stone's throw over the river.

The main road from the town of Manningtree to Mistley, an 18th century port once bustling with grain and coal barges, follows the River Stour's southern shore. 'The Walls' (as the road is known), offers outstanding views down the river. Birds waded in the shallows, yachts bobbed and swung at their moorings. We'd parked at the roadside for a brief stop, and watched sixteen of Mistley's renowned swans glide up river no more than 20 metres away. The remainder of the bevy stood, almost huddled, opposite the quay on a sandbank that was slowly disappearing under a rising tide.

At the next village, Bradfield,



I'd noticed the Strangers Home public house. From behind it, a small attractive campsite peeped out at passerbys. Excellent, I'd thought, committing Strangers Home to the campervan memory bank. We must come back.

LEARN THE LINGO – BLUFFERS GUIDE TO ESSEX

Agg	Aggravation. As in "I've had enough agg"
Awright Babe	Means 'hello' and is applied to both sexes
Bee-ayve	Nothing to do with 60s hairstyles or apiaries. Means settle down
Bruvva	Not always a real brother, but an exclamation of happiness: "Nice one Bruvva!"
Give it lemon	Make a situation worse by being rude
TOWIE	The <i>Only Way Is Essex</i> reality TV show
Mug	Not a drinking vessel, but a chump. As in: "He's been proper mugged off"
Proper	Means 'very' in Essex. As in "He's proper cool"

Reem	Another word for cool
Sick	Nothing to do with dodgy curries. Means cool
Shut up!	Get away with you. As in "Shut up! You got the job..."
Sugar Hut	Brentwood nightclub where orange people go to meet even orange people
Tan	In Essex it means a violent shade of tangerine that makes the wearer look like they've suffered a terrible industrial accident involving radiation
Vajazzle	You really don't want to know. If offered one, run...
Well jel	Well jealous. As in "I was well jel of Mike's trip"



Essex girls

After joining the A120, Harwich was soon upon us. The town's Parkeston Quay accommodates the twice-daily Hook of Holland ferry and it was once from where tenders took supplies and DJs out to the pirate radio ships. Many an Essex Girl stood on this hallowed dockside in the mid-sixties waiting to catch a glimpse of the likes of Tony Blackburn and Johnny Walker.

Those heady pirate radio days are remembered aboard Harwich Museum's lightship LV18.

Moored at Ha'penny Quay in the town's heart, the last manned Trinity House light vessel commemorates both the pirate days and the work of Trinity House and the lightship crews.

Most days when the vessel is open

(11am to 4pm – March to October) museum curator, Tony O'Neil, can be found aboard. Tony, describes himself as a 'people person' and loves meeting visitors. He says: "2018 is a special year for LV18 as we celebrate her 60th birthday. Visitors are always welcome aboard to learn of her fascinating history and see our pirate radio memorabilia."

Harwich's Pier Hotel and Café on the pier face northwesterly with views over the estuarial harbour to the container port at Felixstowe and the River Orwell in Suffolk beyond. This part of Harwich is a pleasing mix of narrow streets and former fishermen's cottages. Around the headland, its east-facing beaches and seafront, known as Dovercourt, lack the character

1 The view south from the Naze Tower

2 Seagull at Clacton on the hunt for any stray chips...

and charm of the old town, but are a popular destination for holidaymakers and day-trippers nonetheless.

It's Walton bruvva!

After Harwich, Essex' landscape is a patchwork of fields and villages. Little Oakley and Great Oakley perch just high enough to afford expansive views over arable farmland rolling gently to the sea. Our next halt was Walton-on-the-Naze.

Walton has both an agricultural and industrial heritage. But its architectural DNA hails back to its emergence as a

Victorian resort. Its famous facades, adorned with arched windows and stone balustrades, are a reminder of its opulent past.

So too is Walton Pier; an impressive



sight extending half a mile towards the horizon. Although the town's lifeboat has been stationed here since 1900, the pier was built to receive paddle steamers; some bringing holidaymakers, and others stopping off on their way to Southwold, Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth.

Naze is proper reem

As we'd left Walton's seafront for the headland known as The Naze, I'd mused on how things have changed. I'd arrived in Walton today after a short and comfortable road journey. One hundred years ago, visitors arrived after a much longer and often uncomfortable voyage.

Here at the Naze, there are cliffs, sands and a nature reserve. It is popular with walkers, nature lovers and tourists. The Naze Tower has dominated the headland since 1720. It was originally built by Trinity House to aid navigation, but since 2004 its 86 feet, 111 steps and 8 floors have been used as a tearoom, a gallery and an observation platform.

After stashing my newly purchased book in George, safely out of public view, I enter the tower and meet Emma the friendly tower manager. She tells me a Kestrel has begun using the nesting box installed on the tower three years ago. It is the first time anything other than a seagull has taken up residence. Emma's excitement is unconcealed.

Entry into the tearoom is free but admission to the gallery and viewing platform is £3. I ascend the iron spiral staircase eagerly, but at a decreasing pace, to see the view from the top once described by BBC Coast presenter, writer, geographer and traveller, Nicholas Crane, as "the finest in Essex".

With quadriceps aching I reach the top and step outside, pausing briefly for a



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long, welcomed intake of Essex air. My eyes adjust to the light revealing a truly spectacular view. To the North across Harwich harbour the cranes of Felixstowe docks stand erect against an azure sky. Eastwards and to the south, offshore windmills pepper the North Sea, whilst to the west the Walton Backwaters, a labyrinth of rivers, creeks and islands, lie waiting to be explored.

Handsome Ransome

The next morning after a comfortable night at Grange Farm campsite, Thorpe-le-Soken, I meet Tony Haggis. He's been running Wildlife Boat Trips from Titchmarsh Marina for 20 years,

3 The Naze Tower

4 Ha'penny Pier, Harwich

5 Beach huts at Walton

6 The kestrel nesting at Naze Tower

7 LV18 Lightship at Harwich

taking customers on two-hour cruises around Walton Backwaters on his boat 'Karina'. He has agreed to give me the tour. I have wanted to see the backwaters since reading Arthur Ransome's *Secret Water*, a story set here. I have long been a lover of the *Swallows and Amazons* series.

As we leave the marina onto a stretch of water called The Twizzle, Tony points west to where at low tide the waters part leaving a causeway across to Horsey Island. It's called 'The Wade', but Tony explains that in *Secret Water* the

Walker children name it the Red Sea.

"What I love," says Tony, "is that sometimes I will get parents with their youngsters who are heavily into Arthur Ransome. They can tell me so much, and they are so enthusiastic that they bring the book with them. I show them where in the book they are, and they are so thrilled by it."

But it is what Tony knows and tells me about the backwaters that make this trip special: "I have always loved wildlife," he says. "I have been bird watching since I was five. I know the backwaters like the back of my hand and the wildlife extremely well, and I try and make people aware that when we go out there, we are in an environment of wildlife. It is not our environment."

For two hours we cruise slowly around the islands and up creeks. Tony points to gulls, terns, turnstones and buzzards. With obvious passion he conveys his knowledge and enthusiasm for the environment and its wildlife effortlessly.

We stop to watch two common seals that surface close by. Tony notices a boat



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come into the backwaters and tells me it is going too fast and that he'll have a word with the owner later.

He says he's seen seals hit by speeding boats three times: "Speed kills. It does on the roads, it does out here."

"It is one thing we have to try to get across, we are now in their environment. After this, you and I will go home, wherever it is, but these animals are still here; 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. This is their environment."

I thought about what Tony Haggis said for the rest of the day, and by the time I turned out the lights that night at Gatehouse Barrs (a Camping and Caravanning Club certified site at Peldon) my appreciation of the seals and birds of Walton Backwaters had grown.

Clacton charmer

Before that, and after Walton, George and I had stopped at Clacton-on-Sea.

The approach to the resort from the north leads through the upmarket Holland-on-Sea. Here, typically coastal, detached residences face east across the road, a generous greensward, a clifftop path and promenade to the North Sea. Holland Beach is great for kids and watersports, and from here the walk into Clacton is a gentle, pleasing stroll.

Clacton remains what it has always been: busy, cared for, temperate and classic British seaside. To the south of the amusement-laden pier, ornamental gardens, including the town's war memorial and a Mediterranean garden, add colour and a sense of calm to the bustling seafront. My walk along the cliff line along Marine Parade afforded me not only a good view of the pier, but of the wind farm on Gunfleet Sands three miles offshore.

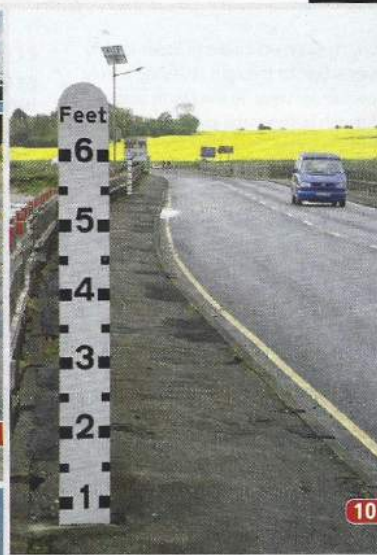
Before leaving Clacton, I ventured just out of the town centre to Clacton Factory

"After this, you and I will go home, wherever it is, but these seals are still here, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. This is their environment"

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Outlet Park for a spot of retail therapy. Shopping isn't on everyone's agenda while campervanning, but easy parking and a host of shops and good deals made it a worthy detour.

Brightlinsea is well sick

I had planned to spend the late afternoon and early evening in Brightlinsea on the banks of the River Colne. The drive inland took me back into rural Essex. The great thing about campervanning is that even though we might plan our route and know where we are going, we can enjoy the surprises we encounter along the way simply by pulling over at the roadside.

Great Bentley was just a name on a map until we encountered the village after leaving Clacton. The main road bisects a vast village green that is surrounded by country cottages and substantial homes. Everything quintessentially English is here: cricket pitch and pavilion, tearoom, duck pond, village sign and a country pub. Great Bentley rightly boasts that it has been voted Essex's best-kept village in 10

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WHERE TO STAY
Grange Farm Campsite
 Grange Farm, Station Road, Thorpe-le-Soken, Clacton-on-Sea, Essex CO16 0HG
 ☎ 01255 861208
 🌐 grangefarmcampsite.co.uk

Gatehouse Barns
 Lodge Cottage, Lodge Lane, Peldon, Colchester, Essex CO5 7PZ
 ☎ 07929 510160/07976 618575



previous years.

So, after an impromptu stop and walk around the village, my arrival in Brightlingsea had been delayed. By then the sun was shining although, away to the west, the evening clouds sent out mixed messages about what the coming weather had in store.

Brightlingsea, just eight miles southeast of Colchester, grabbed headlines in 1995 when livestock exporters briefly used the port to ship livestock to Europe. Protest groups largely made up of local residents blocked roads to the harbour in protest at the conditions animals were transported in.

The town came to public attention previously when Brightlingsea was the coaster *Union Star's* last port of call on 18 December 1981. The vessel foundered at Lamorna Cove, Cornwall with the loss of 16 lives, in what history records as the Penlee Lifeboat Disaster.

But such events are long ago and the town is rarely in the limelight. It is quiet, welcoming and its main street has all the facilities the visitor needs. At its waterfront, restaurants, cafés, tearooms and a development of desirable riverside

- 8** Walton Backwaters
- 9** Brightlingsea quay
- 10** The causeway onto Mersea Island
- 11** Clacton Pier
- 12** Me and "The Only Way Is Essex: Official Guide to Living Life the Essex Way". At least my 'van matches the tan sported by many of the locals...

apartments sit comfortably next to a boating lake and a Blue Flag sandy beach. There are more beaches at East Mersea just a short ferry ride across river.

The Yachtsman's Arms, just back from the harbour, serves food in its bar and restaurant, though not tonight, being a Tuesday. So, after a pint of Guinness and reading a few pages from *Secret Water* (I was still not willing to be seen in public with the TOWIE guide), my evening is rounded off nicely at the Indian restaurant a stone's throw away.

For those who enjoy walks along riverbanks and coastal paths absorbing the unique atmosphere of where land meets the sea, or just looking out over water, especially at the renowned sunsets here, Brightlingsea does not disappoint.

Peldon planning

That night at Peldon, I plan my tomorrow. I have no plans to travel far, only four miles for my first trip onto Mersea Island, the most easterly inhabited island in England. The island is home to over 7,000, though with holiday parks on the eastern side, tourists swell

the number in summer months. The B1025 Colchester Road forms a causeway known as "The Strood", keeping the island connected to mainland Essex other than when the salt waters of the rivers Blackwater and Colne meet at high tides. Some folk claim that the ghost of a Roman soldier walks The Strood, and that the chilling sounds of warriors sword fighting can be heard, especially in October, even when the road is covered by the sea.

I check the tide tables to ensure the causeway will be accessible in the early morning. Happily, there were no problems there. I also learn that parking on the island is adequate and remarkably cheap at just 50p for two hours.

With plans made, I reflect on the day drawing to a close. A day that has given me seaside resorts, a boat trip, a classical English country village, bright sunshine, wide blue skies and a very acceptable curry. But it was those words: "This is their environment... it is not our environment", that occupied my sleepy mind when all other thoughts had gone. I would be a better person for having heard them.